

Canonizing Shakespeare

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A writer's genius lies in the strength of his works which are capable of ensuing fresh perspectives and rich interpretations, irrespective of time and space. Shakespeare is one of those rare geniuses who compel each generation to reinterpret his works with fresh perspectives. The contemporary academic world, which is so intensely involved in the debate on the process of canon-formation (of course I am talking about the western literary canon) has striven to see Shakespeare in the light of different theories. Some of these theorists demand to open the canon since they see some politics behind the formation of canon. Such an offence on the canon, though it may have a strong claim, reduces the canonical stature of an author of genius to the level of either an historian or a propagandist and Shakespeare is no exception to it.

The present paper shall seek to explore Harold Bloom's concern of the canon-formation. Bloom is one of the fiercest canonizers of our time. He has established himself as great bardolater (i.e. a worshipper of Shakespeare) whose bardolatory gives him strength for a certain kind of self-canonization.

Harold Bloom, a Yale Professor, emerges in 50s as a great romantic critic antithetical to the critical hegemony of T.S. Eliot and the New-critics. His critical journey, with the publication of his first work Shelley's *Mythmaking* (1959), begins with the recanonization of the romantic poets. He later develops his early critical insights into the theory of the anxiety of influence. This theory is exemplified in his books. *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), *A Map Of Misreading* (1975) and *Poetry and Repression* (1976). Though these books and the subsequent works establish him well as a theoretician yet his real fame comes with the publication of his most famous book *The Western Canon* (1994). Alongwith this work his later works *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (2002), *Where Shall Wisdom be found* (2004), and *Hamlet: The Poem Unlimited* (2005), constitute him not only as a great Shakespearean reader but also as an important critic involved in the contemporary debate on the process of canon-formation in the Western literary tradition.

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The world Canon, which means a "reed" or "rod" of measurement, has a Christian application, which means rules of the Church regarding the ordering of the Church and religious life. In literary context "canon" suggests the principle of selection by which some text or author is deemed worthier than other texts or authors. A historical approach, following Foucault¹ shows that literature has always served political power and that the canon has been a construct for similar purposes. So Foucault would say let the canon be deconstructed to reveal the power structure and let the literary values be redefined to serve different goals. This almost invariably means the goals of feminists and post-culturalists also. They argue that the process of canon-formation has expressed the exclusion of women, homosexuals and non-white peoples. In the context of Shakespeare, they go to the extent to interpret Shakespeare as a racist, anti-feminist, colonialist, gay and generally a biased propagandist ideologue. Bloom lumps together the various critical schools, which derive inspiration from this approach as the School of Resentment.

Though the approach of this school of resentment can not be ignored, my concern is not to evaluate their interpretations but to explore Bloom's approach to Shakespeare.

Bloom's reading proposes that it is not the secret service to ideology, which makes an author like Shakespeare canonical. Bloom asserts that 'originality' and 'strangeness' makes the author canonical and Shakespeare is the zenith of these parameters. In a way the Bloomian reading of Shakespeare in itself is a search for the rules of canon formation. In his attempt to explore and re-establish the Shakespearean touchstone, Bloom lays following basic assertions:

1. Shakespeare is the centre of the canon or more precisely he is the western canon. Along with it since he has had the status of a secular Bible, he is the secular canon.²

2. Bloom emerges as a champion against New- Historicism which aims to read a genius like Shakespeare as history to unravel Shakespeare as a biased propagandist ideologue. Instead Bloom proposes a Shakespearean reading of history: "... history is more than the history of class struggle or of social oppression, or of gender tyranny. 'Shakespeare makes history' seems to me a more useful formula than 'history makes Shakespeare'".³

3. Bloom observes that Shakespeare's greatest achievement is the creation of uniquely compelling characters. The uniqueness of his genius is "in his universality in the persuasive illusion (is it illusion) that he has peopled a world, remarkably like what we take to our own, with men, women and children preternaturally natural".⁴ Shakespeare's characters not only change in the course of the

plays, itself an innovation, but have the capacity to change themselves through the power of their inwards and reflexive consciousness.⁵ Bloom goes on to say that Shakespeare's representation of character has permanently reformed the "universal human expectations for the verbal invitation which has usurped not only our sense of literary character but our sense of ourselves as characters".⁶ Bloom extends his argument that Shakespeare's characters "get up and walk out of their plays, perhaps even against Shakespeare's own desire, therefore they are 'free artists of themselves'", thus Shakespeare's power remains beyond comparison. Following this parameter Bloom sets Falstaff, Hamlet, Edmund, Cleopatra, Rosalind and other Shakespearean characters as literary touchstones.

4. Shakespearean consciousness is bewildering as he opens his characters to multiple perspectives. Thus Shakespeare suggests "more context for explaining us than we are capable of supplying for explaining his characters".⁸ Therefore, explaining him is an infinite exercise which exhausts one long before the plays are emptied out. It is Shakespeare's strength that he is open for any ideological interpretation but he is free of any ideology. To probe deeper into this matter Bloom devotes an entire book entitled *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, in which he advances his earlier defense of Shakespeare that Shakespeare's eminence is "the rock upon which the School of Resentment must at last founder".⁹

5. Bloom is obsessed with the idea that "Shakespeare has invented us".¹⁰ As most of Bloomian arguments originate against some prior argument, this thought too originates against an argument of the Dutch psychiatrist Jan Hendrick Van Den Berg's *The Changing Nature & Man* that the inner self in modern sense begins with Martin Luther. Bloom comments- "As always with Shakespeare, it is both and neither, and so perhaps the Lutheran inwardness broadly affected the Shakespearean sense of human consciousness. But Shakespearean inward selves seem to me different from Luther's in kind and not just in degree, and different indeed in kind from the entire history of western consciousness up to Luther. Hamlet's radical self-reliance leaps over the centuries and joins itself to Nietzsche's and Emerson's, then goes beyond their outermost limits, and keeps on going beyond ours".¹¹ Simultaneously Bloom erects Hamlet as the character who involves the pre-history of the first absolutely inner-self which belongs not to Martin Luther but to Shakespeare. Bloom further explains Shakespeare as the incomparable psychologist (thus Bloom rejects a Freudian reading of Shakespeare, instead he offers a Shakespearean reading of Freud), inventing a new origin which is the most illuminating idea that any poet ever has discovered or invented the 'self-recognition' or 'self-overhearing'. Following this Bloom rebukes the school of resentment that they are too overwhelmed by social history and by ideologies to recognize our indebtedness to William Shakespeare.¹²

6. Bloom generally offers conclusive statements to prove the supremacy of Shakespeare. An important idea that he proposes is that Shakespeare's indifference is astonishing; he gives the opposite

impression of making as at home out of doors.¹³ Thus Shakespeare's supremacy is in his unmatched power of thinking and he even surpasses Dante- "Dante has been the poet's poet, Shakespeare has been the people's poet".¹⁴

7. Shakespeare is free of the anxiety of influence. Though he gets some ideas from Chaucer and Marlow but after the creation of Hamlet his contest is with his own self.¹⁵ All the above arguments point to only one Bloomian parameter of canon-formation, i.e., the representation of Character. Before the publication of *Genius* Bloom has nothing substantial to say about the medium 'in' which Shakespeare has presented his character. In *Genius* he hints this aspect of Shakespeare's achievement and contribution to the language in which he writes. Bloom says- "Shakespeare's language is primary to his art, and is florabundant. He had a deep drive to coin words anew - he employed more than twenty one hundred separate words".¹⁶ Alas Bloom has nothing more to say about the exuberant beauty of Shakespearean language. In fact he is idiosyncratically obsessed with the characters; especially with Falstaff and Hamlet. He is so obsessed with Falstaff that he wants to see himself as a "parody of Falstaff".¹⁷ More than Falstaff he is obsessed with Hamlet whom he wants to establish as a demigod and the supreme test of canon. He repeats again and again his experiences about Hamlet which in fact establishes Bloom as an experiential critic. His favourite assertions about Hamlet are below:

- (a) Hamlet is the freest artist of himself.¹⁸
- (b) Hamlet is the master overhearer and we cannot think 'ourselves' as separate selves without thinking about Hamlet.¹⁹
- (c) Shakespeare created Hamlet as dialectic of antithetical qualities, unresolved by the hero's death.²⁰
- (d) Bloom's obsession reaches to the peak when he exuberantly declares that the "lost Ur-Hamlet was doubtless a Shakespearean revenge tragedy. Without any sufficient proof Bloom says that there is no Ur-Hamlet by Thomas Kyd."²¹

Bloom's obsession leads him to write an entire book, to prove these points, entitled as *Hamlet: The Poem Unlimited* (2003), (the title is from *Polonius Act-II*). The book is born out of Bloom's dissatisfaction with his own 1998 work *Shakespeare*. In fact this act should be seen as another step to refute Eliot's critical parameter in his essay "Hamlet and his Problem" (1919) the Hamlet is a failure since he fails to achieve objective correlative.²² Bloom constantly argues for universal standards of excellence or aesthetic value. Yet, ironically, he never stops to examine the way he defines his antithetical universe which begins against Eliot and culminates against the School of Resentment. In fact sometimes he offers his own limitation's Focusing so exclusively on the creation of a handful of characters as the key to Shakespeare's genius puts Bloom in an odd position of deciding what to do with the many plays

that come before and after. In Shakespeare early comedies, histories, tragedies and the last plays get dismissed as relative failures or faintly praised for anticipating the fully realized personalities that are to follow. In his chapter on Coriolanus he asks, "in fourteen consecutive months Shakespeare has created Lear and the Fool, Edgar and Edmund, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and Antony and Cleopatra. Compared with that eightfold, in personality or in character Caius Martius scarcely exists. Had Shakespeare wearied of labour of inventing the human, at least in the tragic mode?"²³

Cymbeline, Henry VIII, The Tempest and other plays are approached by Bloom in the same narrow fashion. In fact Bloom goes to the extent of being elegiac. For example, he writes about The Two Noble Kinsmen "a new Shakespeare, who chose to abandon writing after touching and transgressing, the limits of art, and perhaps also of thought. . . he abandons his career long concern with character and personality and presents a darker more remote or estranged vision of human life than ever before".²⁴ No doubt Bloom feels the ultimate vision of life presented by Shakespeare in the highest poetic mode but perhaps Bloom does not want to cope up with Shakespeare's vision; Bloom ignores that Shakespeare's power of seeing life steadily and seeing it whole almost finds its finest expression in his last plays and at its most beautifully in The Tempest.

Joseph Epstein in his article on Bloom writes, "Much of the greater part of Bloom's book on Shakespeare is a great ramble, play by play, in which Bloom puts opinionation upon opinionation arguing with this critic, arguing with that, inserting bits of quite uninteresting academic autobiography, establishing his own superiority, providing as heavy breathing a solipsistic performance".²⁵

Joseph Epstein is right but to a certain limit. Most probably Bloom intends to pursue the reader, since he is a solitary soul to experience Shakespeare on the basis of his own intrinsic vision rather than extrinsic criteria. Despite of all the minor ambivalences Bloom serves a noble purpose of reading. Further Bloom would never have been able to make an assertion that Shakespeare invented humanity as we understand it if it were not at least partly true that we can recognize Shakespeare's characters as being like ourselves.

What emerges from the entire discussion is that a Canon is a set of reading practices. Bloom involves the bringing-to-consciousness and articulation of his reading practice of Shakespeare. His reading makes a unique and compelling contribution to the vast line of

Shakespearean criticism. Significantly he saves critics like Bradley whose notions are under fire nowadays. He offers a totality of the vision through which one can perceive the strength of Shakespeare's plays. Along with it when the contemporary theory is obsessed to formulate the vision of Shakespeare into several isms, Bloom comes as a fresh wind free of all these isms. His experience of deep reading of Shakespeare is his authority and his teaching experience is his voice. Thus his deep reading of Shakespeare canonizes him not only as a great reader but also a great experiential critic.

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